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Are We *Really* Listening? A Good Place to Start

by The Rev. Rachel Rickenbaker

Four years ago, I learned to do something that has stuck with me and become an integral part of my life.

As we were preparing for marriage, my now-husband James and I went through premarital counseling. One activity that our counselor had us do was to address an issue that caused disagreement, using what is called "active listening." First, James expressed his opinion on the matter, and I listened. Then, I had to repeat back to him what he said, to make sure I understood. If I incorrectly added something or read something into what he said, he had an opportunity to correct me. Then, we switched roles, and he did the same, after he listened to me.

This may seem like a trivial exercise, but it's one we still use in our marriage today. Even with our almost-two-year-old, seeking to understand her requires us to listen intentionally. In any relationship, frustration can often stem from miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Are we really listening to each other? I mean, *really* listening? So often, we hear what we want to hear. So often, in our frustration, we don't want to hear anything; we just want to get our point across, regardless of what another is trying to express.

I've been reflecting recently on the words of James, the brother of Jesus:

"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." (James 1:19-20).

This is something we all need to take to heart because we struggle with listening. We live in a noisy world. We turn on the TV or social media, and we are inundated, and it's hard to hear anyone.

Especially now, while we are isolated from one another, it becomes even more difficult to hear people because we can only rely on how people are portrayed through technology. If you've experienced anything like I have over these last few months, it can be difficult sometimes to determine across a screen if someone is sad or angry or bored or feeling something else entirely. I like to see people in person to be able to read body language, hear tone of voice, and see facial expressions. Right now, between screens and masks, that is quite difficult to do.

As much as we can, listening intentionally becomes all the more important during this time apart. Our communities, nation, and world are facing countless struggles. In many ways, it seems we are more divided than ever. But it does not have to be that way. As followers of Jesus, we know that none of our earthly divisions matter in God's Kingdom. Each person, yes, even those with whom we disagree, is beloved by God. Our crucified Lord knows pain and sorrow. No one's cries go unheard.

Take some time to listen to one another, intentionally. During these times, this might require a phone call. If you're on social media, this might mean sending a private message to ask what someone means by what they said before responding to make sure you truly understand them. Before giving a response or posting an article, stop and ask yourself: "Is what I'm saying going to help bring the light and truth of the Gospel, or am I doing this for self-serving reasons, just to make myself feel better?"

Just as listening is necessary in our human relationships, it is vital in our relationship with God. I know sometimes I do a lot of talking in my prayers and then come to a point where I have to stop and listen to what God is saying.

- Listen to how God is speaking to you through prayer.
- Listen to how God is speaking through His Word.
- Listen to how God is speaking through the voices of those crying out in need.
- What is the Spirit saying to us as the Church right now?
- What is the Spirit saying to *you* specifically?

I do not have an easy or foolproof process for unity. But I know that active listening has changed the way I seek to understand others. I would venture to say, for all of us, listening – *really* listening -- is a good place to start.